

2012

Agnes Martin, by Lynne Cooke et al. Dia Art Foundation: New York and Yale University Press: New Haven, 2011 (Book Review)

Vittorio Colaizzi
Old Dominion University

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.odu.edu/art_pubs

 Part of the [Painting Commons](#)

Repository Citation

Colaizzi, Vittorio, "Agnes Martin, by Lynne Cooke et al. Dia Art Foundation: New York and Yale University Press: New Haven, 2011 (Book Review)" (2012). *Art Faculty Publications*. 7.
https://digitalcommons.odu.edu/art_pubs/7

Original Publication Citation

Colaizzi, V. (2012). Agnes Martin, by Lynne Cooke et al. Dia Art Foundation: New York and Yale University Press: New Haven, 2011 (Book Review). *Woman's Art Journal*, 33(2), 50-53.

unconsciously linking her fear of abandonment with her fear of death, and creating, as in the towers, a mother who is both good and bad (the spider eats her young). Finally, for Larratt-Smith, Bourgeois herself becomes the master spider, creator, and tale-spinner. His concise yet powerful essay contains fresh psychoanalytical insights into the artist's work:

Entrenched psychic conflicts condemned the artist to a life of repetition.... Thus art was at once an indication of her underlying psychic disorder and a means of making herself whole. It was both symptom and cure. In the place of Freud's talking cure, which she rejected as inadequate, Bourgeois found another "royal road to the unconscious" in the making of art, which she called her "form of psychoanalysis" (12–13).

The catalog introduction by QMA Chairperson Her Excellency Sheikha Al Mayassa bint Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani states that *Maman's* new home (since 2011) at the National Convention Center Qatar Foundation "has already inspired writers, artists and members of

the public here" (9). Her Excellency sees Bourgeois's spiders as linked to her memories of her mother; she adds that the spider in the Holy Qur'an wove a web that protected the Prophet from his enemies. This information further universalizes the spider and gives Westerners and non-Muslims added insights into another culture.

The exhibition title, "Conscious and Unconscious," is related to a slender sculpture with two sorts of towers. A stack of sponge-like white fabric shapes recall the spinal column and stand for order and the conscious mind. Nearby, on a pole, a blue rubber pear shape is pierced with five needles, each holding a small spool of thread. "The thread represents the unspooling of time, the sewing of the mother-weaver, the spider's web, the fragility of human relationships, and the tenuous linkage to memory," according to Larratt-Smith (15).

The dual language QMA catalog, in English and Arabic, is richly illustrated, and the cover image (Fig. 1), two life-sized pairs of pink marble hands clasped together, suggests closeness, warmth, and friendship between people and cultures. In the full untitled work, the four limbs stop below the elbow,

forming an X. The hands are a symbol or sign of human interconnections.

Other works in the exhibition range from red gouache "flowers," created in 2009, to a womblike, bronze hanging piece *Fée Couturière* (1963), to fabric webs and a fabric head, and metal and marble sculpture pieces, including *Cell XV (for JMW Turner)* (2000), a work in which water spirals together from two sources.

This exhibition catalog seems important both for the intimacy of its theme and for its range of work focusing on layered psychoanalytical readings about relationships between children and their mothers. This universal subject deserves more attention worldwide; it's refreshing to think that the exhibition has opened some minds to women's (and human rights) issues as well as to art that requires some thought. •

Jan Garden Castro is Contributing Editor for *Sculpture* and for *Ceramics: Art & Perception*.

Notes

1. See my article on the towers, "Louise Bourgeois: Turning Myths Inside Out," *Sculpture*, 20:1 (Jan/Feb 2001): 16–23.

Agnes Martin

edited by Lynne Cooke, Karen Kelly, and Barbara Schröder
Dia Art Foundation and
Yale University Press, 2011

Reviewed by Vittorio Colaizzi

The impression emerges, through reading this anthology and remembering the work, that Agnes Martin's paintings are somehow not there. Their qualities and effects are of a second order, not directly tied to their material facts, because as perceptions, they evade and exceed these facts. Although it is entirely clear of what they consist and how they were made, viewers report constant dissolution and condensation of screens, veils, or mists from the tiny elements on the surface. Emblems of the less than absolute sufficiency of empirical knowledge, they

reinforce Martin's claim that "The cause of the response is not traceable in the work" (232). The question with which these essays grapple in light of these effects is: what could such phenomena mean? How are the artist's ambitions and conditions, as well as the conditions of the viewer, inscribed upon them?

Issuing from a colloquium sponsored by the Dia Art Foundation, in conjunction with a series of focused exhibitions, this anthology is, of course, a claim for Martin's importance, but at the same time, particularly in the essays by Rhea Anastas and Jonathan D. Katz, a critique of the very notion of "importance" as it is understood in the survey mode of traditional museums. That is to say, Martin's work cannot be placed, firmly and without reservation, in a causal chain of generation-to-generation influence. Although she is prized by many and her stature is likely to increase, it is

to her credit that she will never be "canonical" in this sense, because her work is singular in its treatment of gesture, scale, seriality, and image, as well as the complexities of meaning that are never fully independent from her persona and career. This singularity makes her an especially appropriate artist to be housed in Dia:Beacon; her work needs the luxurious attention that is less available when placed in a room full of obligatory heavy-hitters of either Abstract Expressionist or Minimalist generations. Because the opportunity to spend time with a sizable body of one artist's work is all too rare, this book can stand as a literary accompaniment to Dia's holdings.

"Literary," because in addition to its scholarly rigor, it reads almost like a novel due to the recurrence of certain themes. One leitmotif is the constant tension or conflict as to pictorial effects,

motivations, and principles. As several of the authors note, a consideration of Martin's work often leads to multiple dualities, such as rigorous measurement versus handmade imperfections, frank materiality versus numinous haze, or apparent depth versus actual flatness, to say nothing of Martin's own personal mythos of artistic commitment coupled with her abrupt abandonment of New York, as well as her avowed classicism against viewers' intimations of the (romantic) sublime. Martin's classicism also contrasts with what she calls "turmoil" or "torment," an emotional intensity and worldly chaos to which she insisted she had "turned" her "back" (174, 68).

Douglas Crimp's refreshingly candid reminiscences of his contact with Martin introduces three interrelated themes; her anomalous 1976 film *Gabriel* (which patiently chronicles a boy's walk alongside water, woods, and flowers), the problematic place of nature in her oeuvre, and the above-mentioned turmoil. *Gabriel* receives a more sustained consideration in Zoe Leonard's generously illustrated essay. Leonard and Crimp's contributions are the most personal and inquisitive, and are perhaps the most true to Martin's somewhat optimistic tone, which is not to say that they are frivolous; their searching character sets the stage for the more analytical approaches to come. In the course of Leonard's essay, she never finds out "whether [Martin] was queer," despite her admitted temptation to speculate (98). This is a strength, not a deficiency, because as an artist herself, Leonard provides a different order of experience to the reader, one not entirely based on knowledge, but equally responsive and responsible to Martin's paintings. For his part, Crimp is the first of many authors to introduce Rosalind Krauss's 1993 essay, "Agnes Martin: The /Cloud/," which crops up repeatedly in this book with the force of a character. Krauss rejects as a viable interpretive rubric the "abstract sublime" and its concomitant evocation of nature. Also engaging Martin's film, she finds, with playful sarcasm, "one after another 'Agnes Martin' painting" throughout the horizontal divisions of landscape. Such a

celebration of natural beauty is, for Krauss, a diversion from what she sees as Martin's primary project, that of objectivizing subjectivity, of using the grid and its dissolution as a signifier that highlights and destabilizes the sovereignty of individual perception. For this she draws on a description by Kasha Linville that organizes perception of a painting by Martin into three states: the close-up view of individual pencil lines, a middle view of unstable mist, and finally a far view of solid opacity.¹

In the present volume, however, nature will not just go away. While Martin insisted that her paintings are "Not about the world, or nature or things like that" (75), she continued to make reference to mountains, trees, waterfalls, etc., in her poetic statements as well as in her titles, only some of which, in the 1960s, were devised by her then-partner, Lenore Tawney (181). While certain shots of *Gabriel* might look like "Agnes Martins," no one who has seriously studied her paintings can think that they are, at bottom, clandestine landscapes. It is, of course, important to temper the interpretation of abstraction as tacit picture-making, which renders moot the very pictorial strategies to which Martin committed. This issue demonstrates what Crimp sees as the fundamental (and compelling) irresolution of Martin's work; it denies referentiality, and wears that denial on its sleeve. Building on Martin's assertion that classicists "stand with [their] back to the turmoil" (68), Crimp posits, "But surely it is the turmoil *away from which Martin turned* (by leaving New York, perhaps) that constitutes the tensions so many of us see in her paintings" (68). For Leonard, Martin's work leads the viewer to nature by inducing a state of concentration. She evocatively describes her "mind mov[ing] past the painting" as she is "held ... not stuck" by one of them, to contemplate her own recent experience of morning light in the city (85).

Suzanne Hudson addresses the nature problem most directly through a contextualization of Martin's rhetoric in relation to contemporaneous social and political history. Pointing to Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) and the growing environmentalist movement,

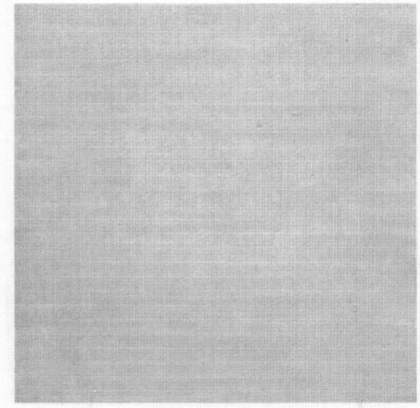


Fig. 1. Agnes Martin, *Play* (1966), acrylic on canvas, 72" x 72". Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

she follows the overused word "nature" through a history of its own, from transcendentalism to ecological ruin. After establishing Martin's shrewd management of her own "gnomic" (120) image, Hudson notes it would be "implausible" (124) for her to identify her ambitions too closely with such a fraught term at the precise moment of its politicization. Martin's famous account in which "the innocence of trees" incited a grid in her imagination represents to Hudson the "cleav[ing]" of the referent from the sign, so that the grid appears "unmoored" (127). Martin, Hudson concludes, decided to "forgo nature to preserve spirituality" (128).

The nature issue leads to an even larger question: that of the generation of meaning in abstraction. In several of the essays, meaning itself is productively interrogated as not encoded within the work's form, but rather something (a state of mind, perhaps, as in Leonard's account) that emerges through the experience of its properties.

Jonathan D. Katz argues that Martin's entire practice—both painting and public construction through behavior, writings, and statements—is a form of "queer self-realization" (173), thereby participating in a broader reinvigoration of abstraction on the part of scholars, critics, and artists that forwards specific perspectives (race, gender, and orientation) against the ostensible universality of modernism. Through a combination of social history, literary parallels with

the poetry of Gertrude Stein (which Martin had invoked in an early statement), and some iconographical sleuthing that links a Zen Buddhist illustration with the painting *Cow* (1960), Katz shows that Martin's queer abstraction is constituted by her pattern of renunciations read against her historical milieu (for example the widespread firings and persecution of homosexuals known as the Lavender Scare of the 1950s, as well as Martin's studio environs in Coenties Slip in Manhattan that included Ellsworth Kelly and Robert Indiana). The unresolved tension of simultaneous and intermingling opposites (grid/plane; measured/hand-wrought; figure-upon-ground/figure-within-ground) that constitutes her formal idiom, according to Katz, challenges "heteronormativity[s] ... policed ... attachment to definitions of difference" (187). By privileging ever more uncertain perceptual experience over the constant search for conceptual resolution and, by implication, power, Katz finds Martin's work to achieve an almost utopian freedom.

With a final rhetorical flourish—"It is a pure presentness, and it is grace" (194)—Katz makes a veiled but obvious reference to the last line in Michael Fried's "Art and Objecthood" of 1967,² the same year Martin left New York. This reference at first seems gratuitous, until one remembers that Fried's claim that the highest achievement of modernist art is to be entirely self-evident and independent appeals to a universality that would be denied to Martin as a lesbian on an everyday level. Moreover, the phenomenological ebullience of her paintings would probably have rendered them "theatrical" in Fried's view. Katz therefore appropriates the same promise that Fried advocated, but in Martin's case it is achieved only through its conditioning by tragic cultural realities. At this point, the reader might also recall Anastas's citation of Lawrence Alloway's careful distinction of Martin's work from the privileged quality of "opticality" in color-based abstract painting (137-38), as well as Jaleh Mansoor's aside that with Martin, "Shape ... is not form" (156), a clear

reference to Fried's writing on Frank Stella. Interwoven in many of the essays is the theme of Martin's exteriority to supposedly mainstream narratives.

In "Self-Effacement, Self-Inscription: Agnes Martin's Singular Quietude," Mansoor similarly makes a claim for an activist Martin by addressing the question of the "self"; specifically, do post-structuralist critiques of the author allow for the agency of a gendered and socially specific subject? Mansoor argues that Martin maintains artistic agency while still distancing herself from the self-expressive paradigm through a "negotiation between adherence to the physical parameters of the discursive structure and a break from them." While the tools of "string and ruler act as surrogates for the binding frame," Martin "resisted the grid's dictates" (156) through the unavoidable imperfection of the hand as well as the nuanced decisions she continued to make as to color, configuration, and interior scale. Among Mansoor's most compelling claims is that through "sheer composition," i.e., what she painted and drew, Martin reinvigorated intentionality, not as self-absorption, but as an "ethical" self-effacement that acknowledged an "Other" (165).

Michael Newman's penultimate essay is dense with both textual reference and attention to the experience of Martin's works. He addresses their unending and multifaceted irresolution, particularly as to the simultaneous phenomenological and structural readings as outlined by Krauss, i.e., they can never be wholly and definitively known through perception, and at the same time the elements and states through which they pass take place in a system of signs. He distinguishes the materiality of paint, canvas, and graphite from the materiality of language, and finds both in Martin's linear constructs. For Newman, there is no raw materiality in her lines, because they always refer to, among other things, writing and drawing, albeit in a "dismembered" state, a term he borrows from Paul de Man (212-13).

Anne M. Wagner's "The Cause of the Response" provides a kind of coda that critiques Linville's account for its "physical ... impossibil[ity]" (233) of

beginning with a close view (one must always approach a painting at first encounter), but ultimately valorizes her intensely contemporary reading. In linking Linville's "red mist of uninflected anguish" to a "body ... vaporized by the blast of a bomb," an allusion rife with the anxieties of the Vietnam era (237), Wagner credits the paintings for renewability in the face of what the viewer brings. They are not blank slates as much as webs that catch one's thoughts, and, as Leonard noted, allow one to divert one's mind and follow it where it will. All of this reinforces Martin's claim from which the title of the essay is taken: "The cause of the response is not traceable in the work."

The other essays flesh out a picture of Martin as fully as any single volume can; Lynne Cooke provides a cogent survey of her work and career, while Christina Bryan Rosenberger addresses her exacting care with materials, while stipulating that Martin saw technique as having "nothing to do with it" (104). Again, Martin demanded that her work lay elsewhere than in its facts. Anastas, drawing on Laura Riding as well as Linda Nochlin, celebrates Martin's work and life choices (particularly her exile from New York) as an act of subversion against the presumed inevitability of the art world's masculine, competitive paradigm. In the course of this argument, Anastas cites Martin's claim that "Painting is not making paintings; it is a development of awareness" (146), reinforcing her work's fundamentally elusive character.

Although densely penciled grids receive the most attention, not all of Martin's paintings adhere to this schema. Nevertheless, the careful and lively detail with which representative works are described makes the authors' focus and purpose clear. Additional treatment, beyond Cooke's thoughtful but necessarily brief mention, of the very late paintings that feature large, black geometric figures on gray grounds would be most welcome, but some time is needed to digest these in the context of her life's work.

A relatively large selection of plates for a critical anthology conveys well the shape of Martin's career. Although they

are a bit small on the page, they are more faithful as to color and texture than other reproductions in circulation, and can trigger memories of actual encounters, while inducing a desire to see the work again. As several of the authors note, the experience of Martin's paintings depends upon a variety of distances and vantage points, a "mating dance" as Wagner calls it (233). This dance is impossible in reproduction, a state that is acknowledged by the close details on the front and back covers and frontispiece to the plates, featuring graphite and colored-pencil grids respectively. Cloth binding echoes the texture of canvas that is so important to Martin's work, and a ribbon bookmark attached to the spine gives the book-as-object a pleasantly antiquated feel.

The essays in this volume are very much in dialogue with previous liter-

ature, and the reader may want to gather some of it for reference. Most frequently cited are the collected writings edited by Dieter Schwarz (1992), Krauss's "The /Cloud/" (1992), Briony Fer's "Drawing Drawing: Agnes Martin's Infinity" (2005), Kasha Linville's "Agnes Martin: An Appreciation" (1971), Thomas McEvilley's "Grey Geese Descending" (1987), as well as the writings of Alloway (1973). The many critical treatments might make one dream about another anthology of previously published materials, although the extensive bibliography will assist the reader in procuring these sources.

This book will be of particular value to practicing artists in addition to art historians and students, because of its protracted look at Martin's methods and goals. Her tenacity is likely to inspire, and the variety of contributors' approaches

models the complicated permutations of intention, perception, and meaning that inform an artist's reception. •

Vittorio Colaizzi is an assistant professor of art history at Old Dominion University, and is currently completing a book on Robert Ryman.

Notes

1. Rosalind Krauss, "Agnes Martin: The /Cloud/," in *Bachelors*, (Cambridge: MIT, 1999): 75-89. See also Kasha Linville, "Agnes Martin: An Appreciation," *Artforum* 9, no. 10 (June 1971): 72-73.
2. Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," in Gregory Battcock, ed., *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1968), 147.

In Wonderland: The Surrealist Adventures of Women Artists in Mexico and the United States

edited by Ilene Susan Fort and Tere Arcq
with Terri Geis
Delmonico Books and Prestel, 2012

Reviewed by Natalie Phillips

Oftentimes, exhibition catalogs are useful only to experts in the field, rarely appealing to both the general public and serious scholars. However, this catalog manages to do both. *In Wonderland: The Surrealist Adventures of Women Artists in Mexico and the United States* is a welcome resource. The catalog was published in conjunction with an exhibition that was jointly organized by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) and the Museo de Arte Moderno in Mexico City. Its short but thorough history of women surrealists in Mexico and the United States is coupled with articles that explore a variety of scholarly topics.

Editors Ilene Susan Fort and Tere Arcq have included essays by well-known scholars in the field that feature a wide-range of artists and topics, as well as

varying perspectives. The essays also deal with a range of historical periods, from the 1930s—when surrealism moved beyond the borders of Europe—to an examination of surrealism's influence on later generations of women in the contemporary period.

More than two hundred high-quality images meticulously reproduce a variety of works, some of them well known but not often exhibited, others little known. Brief biographies written by Terri Geis on all forty-eight of the women featured in the exhibition, as well as selected individual bibliographies, help to locate each artist in historical context. The surrealist movement was dominated by men, many of whom viewed women as muses, and as less capable of becoming artists in their own right. As Whitney Chadwick notes in her prologue, this exhibition is the first to truly explore the role of women internationally in the surrealist movement. That said, many of the women discussed in the catalog did not explicitly identify with surrealism but rather drew influences from the movement that were relevant to their own experiences as women. Chadwick sets the tone for the catalog, saying that Mexico and the United States are "central to this narrative, both for the lasting

impact of surrealism in those countries and for the relatively large number of women artists who were associated with it" (12). Some of the women featured in the book, including the photographer Lee Miller (1907-77) and painters Leonora Carrington (1917-2011) and Jacqueline Lamba (1910-93), were among those associated with surrealism in Paris before the war and later became "part of the movement's legacy in North America" (12). Mexico City also drew a number of important surrealist émigrés, including painter Remedios Varo (1908-63), photographer Kati Horna (1912-2000), and eventually, Carrington. Chadwick also notes that as early as the 1940s, women gallerists—Betty Parsons and Peggy Guggenheim in New York and Carolina and Inés Amor in Mexico City—were exhibiting works by the surrealists, both male and female.

Fort's introductory essay, "In the Land of Reinvention," gives a historical overview of surrealism in the United States, including women surrealists working in the U.S. and exhibitions of surrealist art. She notes several key themes that appear in the women's work, such as the refusal to sexualize the female body like their male counterparts had done. Instead, women used the